

Wildlife & Walks through the year



WATCHING WILD CREATURES going about their daily business of finding food, breeding, rearing young, sheltering, sleeping is utterly fascinating. There is a great variety of wildlife to enjoy on a walk at Holy Cross. Birds: over 70 species so far recorded. Mammals: 12, ranging in size from Pipistrelle Bats to Roe Deer. Reptiles & amphibians: 4 species. Insects: butterflies, dragonflies, bees, of course and the wild flowers.

The farmland here has been managed under conservation schemes for over twenty years so there is already a richness of species here. Our Benedictine ethos at Holy Cross encourages us to care for our land and the environment, encompassing ideals of sustainability, conservation and the care of all things. The best way to enjoy it all is to walk slowly and watchfully around the land, pausing or sitting from time to time on the wooden benches.

YOU CAN BEGIN A WALK by the Old Farm Pond still being restored but already full of snails and invertebrates and plants. The Dog Kennel shed has been fitted out as a Hide so you can sit and view either the pond, over the half door or the New Wood Plantation through the lift up hatch on the north side.

If you walk behind the Pond you come into New Wood which has grassy paths through the newly planted trees, many of which we have grown from seed or seedlings. The path will lead you either west to the Kitchen Garden where you may see what vegetables you will be eating at meal times, or you can walk east along the new ditch on the north boundary.

This will take you to the bridge over the main north/south ditch and into the Meadow. These two acres are planted with a 'pollen & nectar mix' of flowering plants which ensures abundant insect life in spring. If you walk along the north side of the Meadow there is no fence or hedge here so that you can enjoy an uninterrupted view looking towards Bunny Wood on the skyline or south to the Charnwoods. Please take care not to go further north than the line that running from the bridge through the large tree trunks and the seats as the rest of this large field is private land.

Continue your walk to the edge of Intake Wood, and walking back along the other side of the Meadow come to another bridge which takes you into the Wood itself. There are many paths here and they will lead you through woodland of some 80-90 year old oak and ash trees. You will see dead-wood hedges defining the visitors' area. These are another fine habitat for invertebrates, especially beetles and many kinds of larvae and also birds such as Wrens, but they are also boundaries as the rest of the wood is either part of the Sisters' Enclosure or private property.

On the Orchard side of the wood you can see the Barn Owl nest box on an Oak tree in the hedgerow leading away from you. We hope to put up a screen here in the wood that will enable you to watch the Owls as they hunt in the Orchard through spring and early summer. To leave Intake Wood go back over the bridge and walk down the hedgerow alongside the Meadow and back through the open farm gate to the Pond. The hedgerows on this last short walk are a favourite place for small birds singing or feeding.

ANOTHER WALK, through the main gate and along the Farm Track to the west, is a good one to do but please take care of farm or Convent traffic. The land either side of the track is private property so don't stray off the main path.

THE NUMBER OF HABITATS here is one reason for the range of species present. **THE BUILDINGS**, old and new, are ideal nest sites for House Martins. Bats roost in the Workshop roof space. Kestrels roost high up on the corners of St Benedict's, hunting their prey over the arable and grass fields.

Buzzards nest in **INTAKE WOOD**, which is also full of woodland and garden birds, the migrant warblers, tits, woodpeckers, Tawny Owls. Hares spend time there in winter and of course the Deer are found in cover in Wood.

THE ROUGH GRASS of the Orchard and the wide field margins are such a good place for Voles and Mice that they are the best hunting ground for the predators such as Owls, Kestrels and Foxes. **HEDGEROWS** at different stages of management provide varying heights and densities to satisfy many farmland bird such as Yellowhammers, Linnets, Bullfinches, Whitethroats as well as the creatures living in hedge bottoms. Bats hunt their length by night. **THE MEADOW** is ideal for Butterflies, Dragonflies, Bees, Beetles and many other invertebrates with its crop of vetch, red & white clover, phacelia, trefoil.

We are building our numbers of reptiles & amphibians by restoring the **OLD FARM POND** near the front door. Life in the pond itself is gradually increasing and Grass Snakes and Slow Worms are plentiful as you will see if you lift one of the **REPTILE REFUGES**, underneath there may be one of these attractive reptiles warming themselves. Other favourite spots for them are the **LOG PILES AND HAY BANKS**.

Larger mammals are often visible even to the casual observer; Hares can be seen any day in spring and summer almost anywhere on the estate, Foxes are also a daily sight particularly in spring & early summer when they have cubs to feed and hunt in the daytime. The very lucky (and very quiet) observer may see a Roe Deer in the wood or perhaps a Muntjac in a thicket of bramble or hawthorn or drinking at the Pond.

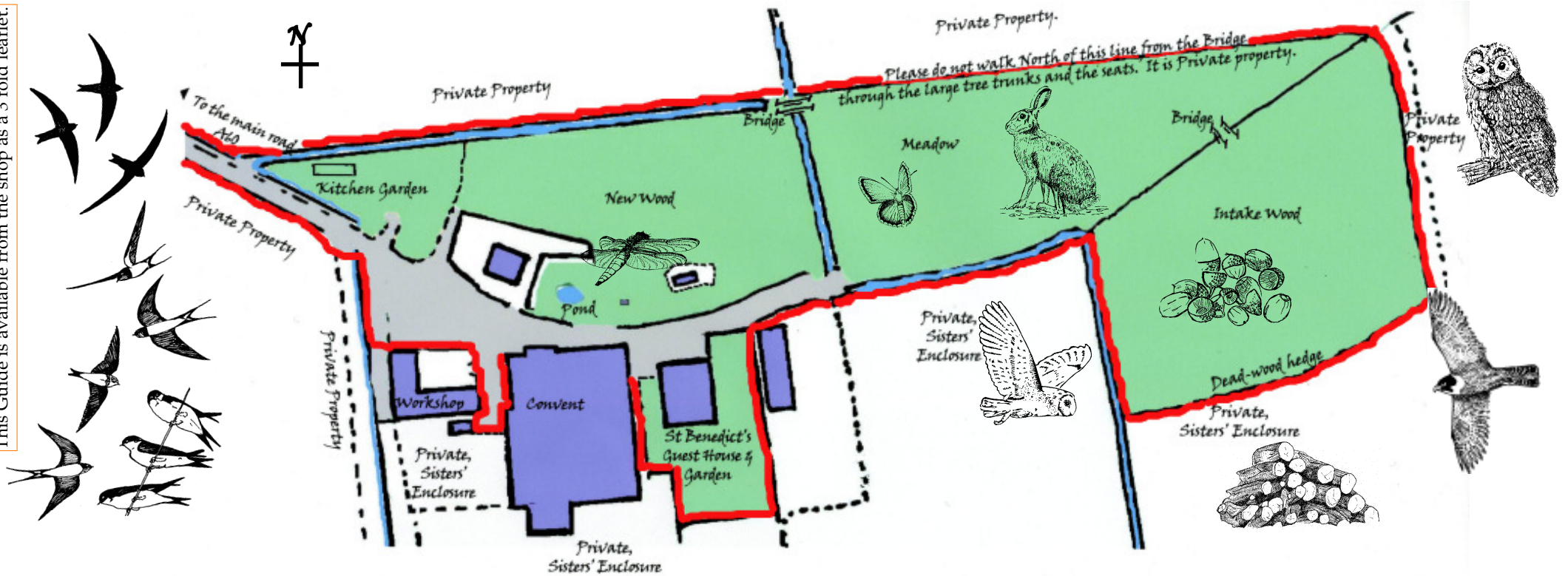
ENJOY YOUR TIME HERE, AND TELL US WHAT YOU SEE.

SAFETY

You are free to walk the Farm Track back to the main road but please be aware of Convent & Farm traffic.

Please do not walk in Intake Wood when it is windy.

There may be falling branches in such woodland in windy conditions.



SPRING

One of the breathtaking sites of Intake Wood is the Lesser Celandine in March. The woodland floor is a golden carpet. Among them are Dog Violets and Wood Anemones, after them come the Bluebells.

On early mornings in the Meadow or on the crops Hares can be seen chasing each other and 'boxing' before racing off again, and then perhaps feeding quietly towards the late afternoon.

Woodpeckers will be drumming in Intake Wood and the arrival of Chiff Chaff in late March, Swallows & House Martins in April will begin the busy side of spring with pairing and nest building. Martins & Swallows will start to collect mud to build their nests.

Many other farmland birds are singing in the hedgerows: Yellowhammers, Linnets, Whitethroats; Skylarks preside over the fields with their superbly joyful song. Lapwings will be calling and displaying. The woodland too echoes with the songs of resident and migrant species setting up territories.

Look for waking reptiles & amphibians near the Pond, Slow Worms as well as Frogs, Toads & Grass Snakes.

SUMMER

By June most birds are well into rearing their broods, some will be flying already, especially the garden birds who will be calling to be fed from the bushes & trees in the garden of St Benedict's.

It is possible that you may find a leveret (baby Hare) hiding snugly against a grassy tussock or plant. Look, but please don't touch or disturb it in any way. The doe leaves them thus for safety during the day and will return at evening to suckle and care for them.

Chaser Dragonflies will be near the Pond and Hawk-ers may be there or over the Meadow with bees and many butterflies, adding to the colour of the flowers.

The Barn Owls will be feeding their chicks almost all day and make a wonderful site flying slowly and very low over the grass in the Orchard or the Meadow. Field voles & Wood Mice are easy prey and very plentiful, you can see them as you walk, scuttling for safety down the cracks and holes in the clay ground.

On blue summer days Buzzards will be soaring on thermals over Intake Wood, calling with their 'mew' to each other, encouraging the juveniles to fly.

AUTUMN

As the year begins to turn, the berries ripen in the hedgerows, the Swallows & House Martins gather in their migration flocks, Willow Warblers & Chiff Chaffs often sing again while they stock up before they too depart.

Towards the end of September the first winter migrants, Fieldfares & Redwings, will arrive from Scandinavia. They will start to feed on the abundant berries of Hawthorn and Sloe.

A very occasional excitement can be the sight of a Peregrine Falcon, hunting high up over the fields.

The Grey Partridge, now so uncommon, breeds here in small numbers and a party or covey of these may be seen in the long grass making their way along the hedgerows, their anxious orange faces popping up from time to time to check the landscape.

Young Foxes begin to leave home and explore and often have a look of surprised enquiry as they encounter a human being. Hedgehogs and the Reptiles will be investigating log piles and hay banks for suitable winter quarters.

WINTER

Frosts, ice & snow are bound to come in some degree and bats, hedgehogs, reptiles & amphibians will be in full hibernation, other creatures will spend at least the worst cold holed-up somewhere warm. These latter will still need to feed regularly which the hibernators will not do. In a hard winter here white-coated Stoats have been seen but the lovely golden brown coats of Stoat, Weasel or Fox against the snow is a more common sight.

The Fieldfares & Redwings will be in the Orchard feasting on the remains of the apples and the hedges are populated with other winter visitors, Siskins flocking with our resident species, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Linnets, Yellowhammers and various Tits.

The Golden Plover is a wader, living on high moorland much of the year. In winter they visit coasts & lowlands and you may see them out in the midst of a field of winter wheat, especially along the main Farm Track. A small close flock of 10 or maybe 100 birds, looking brown and dull till the sun shines on them giving them, even in winter, the golden cloaks of their name.